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Creative Renewal of the Son Jarocho Fandango in Los Angeles

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Alexandro D. Hernández
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Bio (Read by Colin Gunkel):

Alexandro D. Hernández is a UCLA Doctoral Candidate in Ethnomusicology, multi-instrumentalist, songwriter, and active performer. Hernández is a recipient of the Durfee Master Musician/Apprentice grant under close instruction of César Castro, a son jarocho maestro from the legendary Grupo Mono Blanco of Veracruz, México. He has toured with Chicano music veterans Quetzal and currently works with East Los Angeles son jarocho group Cambalache and ethereal post-punk band ¡Aparato!

Hernández has over nine years presenting his scholarly work at national and international conferences and universities in México and the U.S. He conducts research on music of struggle and protest within the Chican@ population. His master's thesis engages the topic of instrumental protest music through Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis. Hernández is currently working his dissertation "Voices of Struggle and Protest in Chicano-Jarocho and Latin Alternative Los Angeles."

Introduction of myself via "El siquisirí" (An introductory son jarocho used to initiate a fandango)

Estribillo/Chorus:

Válgame Dios, válgame Dios
Transité la serranía
Como si fuera leopardo
Y mi nombre es Alexandro
Y yo soy un fronterizo
Desde el pueblo de Del Río

Creative Renewal of the Son Jarocho Fandango in Los Angeles

For Chicanos and Veracruzanos, the son jarocho fandango is an example of creative renewal of cultural heritage, to retrieve possibilities of a "lost" his/hertories of rural traditions. Or better yet, to practice a musical-cultural heritage—in the broadest sense of Mexican nationalism—that was rejected, denied, or never introduced by family or community. It is a re-appropriation and re-activation of gathering in order to build a sense of community and belonging. Ethnomusicologist Steven Loza expresses that "conscious adoption of a stylistic adaptation to Mexican musical genres represented an affirmation of

their ethnic origin and identity” (Loza 1992). The son jarocho fandango is a stronger test of attestation, an expression of “this is who we are,” and through this practice resistance comes in the moment where there is a demand to be recognized in the public space. By analyzing Chicano-Jarocho scene culture, this essay gives emphasis to these groups and how it utilizes the fandango at demonstrations, community centers, and public schools in Los Angeles.

The creative renewal of cultural heritage allows for recovery and appropriation into different contexts. The continuity and preservation of the son jarocho fandango in the past thirty-years did not result in “authentic” recovery of this “lost” practice, but a carrying forward of a centuries old phenomenon into the future. For example, people with urban identity—be it the port of Veracruz, Mexico City, Los Angeles, or Austin—dress and dance differently than those with conservative identity.

Creative renewal leads to a demand for recognition for Chicanas and Chicanos who practice a cultural heritage—the son jarocho fandango—that is, in actuality, a rural practiced transferred into the urban ambit. When a Chicanas and Chicanos publicly engages the fandango and simultaneously alters meaning by context, place, or mode of dress, there is a declaration of both creative renewal of tradition and an attestation of identity. The Chicano identity is one that exists “teetering” between two or multiple worlds and goes through the physical or psychological experience of belonging, rejection, dialogue, or ambivalence in U.S.-México relations. This experience is mediated through cultural practice and the Chicano-Jarocho fandango is a format for a renewal of identity.

U.S. son jarocho groups associate with radicalized re-interpretations of this tradition, in the perspective similar to Woody Guthrie writing “This Machine Kills Fascists” on his acoustic guitar. Son del Centro, from Santa Ana, California, titled their

first recording “Mi jarana es mi fusil” (“My jarana is my Automatic Weapon”). Son Armado (“Armed Son”), a group from Austin, Texas proposes: “our music and fandango exists with our movement and resistance, it does not exist outside of the struggle for dignity, respect, and justice” (Facebook manifesto accessed on 3-9-10). This is a powerful statement through an activist perspective and positions the fandango, in the U.S., solely as a demand for social justice. The politicized fandango therefore manifests itself and rallies/marches for international migrant rights, protests at universities, and even into the Occupy Movement where Latin@s are not fully represented. Since many Chicano son jarocho interpreters were activists previous to adopting this tradition, the son jarocho and fandango are synonymous with centers, projects, and actions dedicated to social justice.

However, the son jarocho and fandango does not solely amount to music of struggle and protest to every practitioner. For Jarochos in the Sotavento (and even Veracruzanos in Los Angeles), the son jarocho is an expression of life and a way to create a world. Hannah Arendt states, “Among the things of the world we have to distinguish between things that are used and works of art” (Arendt 2007:189). The son jarocho is a work of art and it builds a world for the Sotavento region of Southern Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Tabasco. This tradition is a shining force toward the possibility to express life’s complexities through song and dance. The main function of the fandango is to create community and through this gathering a musical-cultural identity is established. *Zapateado* dancer Rubí Oseguera Rueda states, “to dance the son jarocho is to narrate [our] history” (Oseguera 2009). I will expand on Oseguera’s statement. To engage the son jarocho is to activate and push forward the history of a people, jarochos, through verses, instruments, and dance. Once the son jarocho travels to the U.S., the tradition is

then revitalized and renewed through the Chicano community. The fandango is the primary space for experimentation and re-interpretation of the son jarocho within the urban centers, and some rural spaces, within the U.S.

However, conflicts arise with competing claims of authenticity. Political philosopher Paul Ricouer states, “there is a kind of unresolved contradiction tied to the difficulty, even the possibility, of legitimating authority in the final instance” (Ricouer 2007: 91). Whenever creative innovation pushes too far for conservative or preservationist comfort, the demand for a “legitimate authority” provides conflict for a living-changing musical movement. Ever since the push to modernize the son jarocho in Veracruz urban centers and Mexico City in the 1950s, the claim of authority imposed the growth of the fandango, to the point that it was removed from son jarocho cultural performances. The sense of community building and gathering was lost once the son jarocho was commercialized in return for musical prowess and standardization of *sones* into three to four-minute songs for radio and recording purposes. In Los Angeles, the current competing claim of authority comes from a generational and musical achievement standpoint. Although the discussion is based on who deserves to “properly” represent the son jarocho in the public space, dialogue and community building via the fandango is maintained.

The fandango in Los Angeles

A fandango/performance can happen anywhere: at a ranch in Veracruz, in 30-degree weather in Austin, TX, and even at a march, rally, or protest for social justice (in the “moving” fandango, a portable tarima is essential). In the past ten years, the new son jarocho movement in Southern California has activated the fandango as a way to unite progressive politics, community resistance, and multi-layered Chicano/Mexicano cultural

production.¹ The urban fandango in Los Angeles represents a tension between tradition and innovation. For example, the urban fandango utilizes traditional repertoire and structure but meets occasional dissimulation into rapped vocals, *zapateado* dancing with tennis shoes—instead of boots with wooden soles, and most importantly, *versada* that positions Chicanas and Chicanos within social location in the U.S. Like the band Quetzal claims, “estoy aquí, no allá” (Worksongs 2003).

Fandangos are not in the same space than the rest of America. They exist within the Chicano-Mexicano communities of the U.S. and become highly visible at marches and protests. The fandango is a way to be heard and recognized by affirming Chicano-Jarocho cultural heritage. Political philosopher Hannah Arendt suggests, “all of culture begins with this kind of world-making, which in Aristotelian terms is already an *athanatidzein*, a making-immortal” (Arendt 2007:189). For Chicanos and Mexicanos, the fandango is a way to create a world by gathering and practicing centuries worth of musical-cultural history. The fandango has faced moments of State and Church repression, for example, during the Spanish Inquisition, but the cyclical-creative renewal of this phenomenon forges this practice into newer generations, a metaphoric “immortality.” The son jarocho and its fandango have grown in popularity within a community of Southern California (and beyond) musicians, activists, and scholars. But I must emphasize that the adoption and preservation of this musical-cultural heritage faces creative altering and innovation in order to create relevancy in a new space and generation.

A fandango in the U.S. is not only a removal from its place of origin within México, but also a move from rural to urban landscapes. On October 3, 2009 a fandango

¹ Previous son jarocho musicians in California, from the 1970s until recently, utilized the son jarocho primarily in the performance/concert setting.

was held directly on Colorado Boulevard at the Eagle Rock Music Festival. Amongst the hard concrete of a Los Angeles street, East Los Angeles Chicano-Jarocho group Las Cafeteras scheduled the fandango and invited all son jarocho musicians and enthusiasts to participate. Amidst over 15 stages of 60 artists propped along Colorado Blvd., a *tarima*—the wooden platform from which the fandango gathers around—was set up on the boulevard, establishing a musical-cultural display of Chicano-Jarocho identity. Stuart Hall states that identity is “constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics of another person or group...and with a natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation” (Hall 1996:2). The fandango at the Eagle Rock Music Festival is highly significant (see figure 4). Drawing from Hall’s statement, a Chicano-Jarocho identity was established by the very nature of the fandango, a gathering of son jarocho interpreters literally enclosed around a *tarima* to demonstrate a creative renewal of cultural heritage. The fact that the *tarima* was positioned on Colorado Blvd. is an attestation of Chicano-Jarocho urban identity.

Conclusions

First, the son jarocho as music for social justice is consistent with its origin as a political tool that has historically voiced the issues of marginalized, multi-ethnic *jarochos*. For example, “El presidente”² describes the oppressive conditions of rural Veracruz and accuses the President of criminal activity. *Sones* such as “El chuchumbé”³ speak out against the Catholic clergy, their sexual tendencies, and repressive religious law. Next, preservation and syncretism of this tradition allows for an organic process of change that begins new musical-cultural styles and identity. Mexican scholar Nestor

² Mr. President

³ A rhythm originally of West African origin. “El chuchumbé” utilizes double-entendre as reference to the phallus.

García Canclini states, “a first obstacle to the folkloric knowledge proceeds from the delineation of the object of study. The ‘folk’ is seen, in a similar way to Europe, as a property of isolated and self-sufficient indigenous or peasant groups whose simple techniques and little social differentiation preserve them from modern threats” (García Canclini 1995). García Canclini challenges essentialist notions of folk music that prescribes to the belief that an authentic folk sound is untarnished by modernity.

A social movement does not exist without musical accompaniment to inspire, build moral, and allow reflection through its lyrics—even political chants often follow a militant beat in duple meter. Resistance does not only manifest in progressive/leftist politics but it reveals itself through cultural heritage. The Chicano-Jarocho fandango in Southern California is an embodiment where rural tradition meets urban identity. This practice is first engaged through social-cultural gathering and then becomes political as it reveals itself to the public sphere. It is at this moment where the demand for recognition becomes a powerful affirmation of the Chicano-Jarocho cultural movement.